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# Crossing boundaries: Understanding the pro-asylum narratives of young Australians

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses interview data collected from young people in Queensland, Australia, to report the narratives of young Australians on the issue of ‘boat people’ and to explore the ‘accepting’ viewpoint. Consistent with existing literature, the ‘anti-asylum’ interviewees construct symbolic boundaries via language to justify why they believe exclusionary measures should be taken against asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia by boat. In order to challenge this language of exclusion, our findings suggest the ‘pro-asylum’ participants adopt narratives aligned with the cosmopolitan principles of responsibility, openness and compassion. By doing so, they defend their belief that Australia’s obligations towards the broader global community should take precedence over any challenges ‘boat people’ present to the Australian nation.

**Keywords:** Asylum seekers, symbolic boundaries, cosmopolitanism, acceptance, young people, Australia

## **Introduction**

In Australia, there is ongoing public debate surrounding how the federal government should respond to asylum seekers who attempt to enter Australian territory by boat. Some Australians argue these boats should be turned away, whereas others believe that they should be admitted. The attitudes of Australians towards asylum seekers<sup>1</sup> have been the focus of numerous studies, with considerable attention paid to explaining negative perceptions of

asylum seekers (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007, 2008; McKay et al., 2012; O'Doherty and Augoustinos, 2008). The consensus is that asylum seekers, particularly 'boat people', are discursively constructed in a way that invokes a sense of fear and anxiety amongst the Australian public. However, while much research has been undertaken to investigate why asylum seekers are subjected to exclusionary pressures, less attention has been paid to understanding the mechanisms of acceptance. This paper is an attempt to redress this research bias.

In this study, we examine the narratives of young Australians who have definitive views on the issue of 'boat people' being permitted into Australia. Drawing on interview data collected from participants involved in an ongoing study of young people in Queensland, we compare and contrast the arguments of those who reject boat people with those who accept them. We suggest the language employed by young people who are accepting of unexpected arrivals to Australia reflects cosmopolitan principles. These narratives, we argue, countervail anti-asylum rhetoric that is common within Australian public discourse.

### **Symbolic boundaries**

As a theoretical construct, the notion of 'boundary' has been applied extensively throughout the social sciences, providing a framework for understanding social identity, intergroup interaction and group exclusion. This concept has featured in the work of theorists such as Barth (1969), Tajfel and Turner (1979), and, more recently, Lamont and Molnár (2002). A boundary is conceptualised as a barrier that defines, contains and protects but also separates and limits. While boundaries may take the form of physical partitions, demarcating territorial possession, they are often symbolically codified (Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Boundaries constructed through the use of language, beliefs and ideas may not be directly visible but are equally powerful. Lamont and Molnár (2002: 168) have described symbolic boundaries as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space'. This notion of distinction is important – while symbolic boundaries create a sense of similarity and cohesion between members of the same group, they also serve to highlight disparities between groups. By defining their own distinctive characteristics and differentiating themselves from others, a group creates a sense of who they are and what they represent. Those who share similar viewpoints and common goals are seen to belong and they are, as Barth (1969: 15) aptly describes, 'playing the same game'. On the other hand, those believed not to have the same views are categorised as being different and possibly incompatible (Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Exclusion is an integral component of group identity and boundary maintenance. By excluding others deemed not to belong, the identity and integrity of a group is protected. This can be achieved through the construction of symbolic and social boundaries, including the use of negative categorisations and stereotypes, whereby members of the outsider minority are attributed characteristics claimed to be undesirable or threatening. Based on these beliefs, exclusionary action can be considered justified (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

The movement of asylum seekers across state borders poses a challenge to many nations and undermines self-assuredness about the composition of communities (Beck and Sznaider, 2010; Fine, 2007; Morris, 2009). One explanation for anti-asylum sentiment is that the values, cultures and behaviours of asylum seekers are deemed to be incompatible with those whose borders they are attempting to cross. Consequently, they are seen as undesirable (e.g. Malloch and Stanley, 2005; Welch and Schuster, 2005). As a signatory of the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and its associated *1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (UNHCR, 2010), Australia has a responsibility to provide protection to individuals who enter its territory and request humanitarian protection (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014). Since 2001 however, asylum seekers have been the target of considerable antagonism in Australia. Events such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the *Tampa* incident and the ‘Children Overboard’ affair<sup>2</sup> have led to policies of border protection and asylum seeker deterrence has become a ‘wedge’ issue in Australian politics. Australians have found themselves challenged to meet humanitarian obligations while, at the same time, addressing concerns that asylum seekers present an unacceptable threat to their country (Haslam and Holland, 2012; O’Doherty and Augoustinos, 2008).

Discursive representations of asylum seekers as a threat to Australia have reinforced a conviction that asylum seekers are not welcome; thus building barriers to their acceptance into Australia. Some literature describes, for example, how politicians and some elements of the media engage in anti-asylum rhetoric, which perpetuate the idea that asylum seekers have transgressed against Australia (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007, 2008; McKay et al., 2011; Rowe and O’Brien, 2014). The legitimacy of asylum seeker claims, for example, is questioned by the suggestion that they are ‘illegals’, not entitled to sanctuary in Australia, or economic opportunists who are untruthful about having fled persecution. Moreover, asylum seekers are sometimes accused of being terrorists or ‘extremists’, who intend to cause disruption, or impose their own religious and cultural beliefs onto the Australian nation. Such constructions make it difficult for asylum seekers to be accepted by this country and its residents (Every and Augoustinos, 2008; Hartley and Pedersen, 2007; Haslam and Holland, 2012; McKay et al., 2012).

Not all Australians subscribe to this position, however, and are instead acting to challenge these boundaries. Research into pro-asylum discourse, for instance, has found that Australian politicians who advocate for a more inclusionary Australia use more accepting language (Every and Augoustinos, 2008; Rowe and O’Brien, 2014). Also, Fozdar and Pedersen (2013: 317) describe a ‘counter-hegemonic discourse’ used on blog sites to counteract anti-asylum sentiment. While such studies provide valuable evidence of ‘accepting’ rhetoric being used in Australia to challenge exclusionary views, we believe there is room to expand understanding of the mechanisms that promote this language. We suggest that applying a framework based on the principles of cosmopolitanism will conceptually advance our comprehension of the strategies some people employ to actively deconstruct symbolic boundaries and instead advocate for the acceptance of asylum seekers in Australia.

## **Cosmopolitanism and the acceptance of asylum seekers**

Sociological literature includes both theoretical (e.g. Beck and Sznaider, 2010; Delanty, 2006, 2012) and empirical (e.g. Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Morris, 2009, 2010; Skrbiš and Woodward, 2007) accounts of cosmopolitan phenomena. According to Nussbaum (1996: 4), the 'cosmopolitan' is 'the person whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings'. Similarly, Calhoun (2008: 428) describes cosmopolitanism as an act of 'focusing on the world as a whole rather than a particular locality or group within it'. The term may refer to a utopian ideal or political agenda (Delanty, 2006), the demonstration of competencies across the international stage (Roudometof, 2005) or preparedness to accept ethnic and cultural difference (Appiah, 2006; Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Skrbiš and Woodward, 2007). While this paper does not allow us to expand upon the numerous arguments underpinning the concept of cosmopolitanism, suffice to say, at the core of this theoretical framework lies a strong ethic of inclusiveness and a preparedness to engage openly with all members of the global community.

When speaking of 'being cosmopolitan' Skrbiš and Woodward (2007: 734) believe the cosmopolitan individual is one who 'possesses skills to negotiate cultural diversity, hybridity and otherness'. The cosmopolitan individual understands that the people who inhabit this world are becoming increasingly (and often inextricably) interconnected. Moreover, they possess the skills that allow them to cross boundaries between what is familiar and what is not. For such a person, cosmopolitanism is an ethical outlook where a sense of responsibility, openness and compassion is shown towards the 'other' (Appiah, 2006; Nussbaum, 1996).

The cosmopolitan perspective can be observed within the everyday and ordinary domains (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002; Skrbiš and Woodward, 2007). In their oft-cited study of counter-racism discourses among blue-collar workers in the United States and France, Lamont and Aksartova (2002) refer to the term 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' as meaning an outlook of acceptance and inclusion shown by people who encounter ethnic and/or cultural diversity within the course of their everyday lives. While cosmopolitanism has been identified as a useful construct for observing and understanding engagement with difference, few studies have applied the framework for understanding the acceptance of asylum seekers. One exception is research undertaken by Morris (2009, 2010) where she recounts the rulings made by British judges on issues surrounding welfare payments to asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Morris observes instances of either a 'national' or 'cosmopolitan' paradigm in these judgments, describing the approach taken by judges who emphasise the importance of human rights over national concerns, as a 'judicial cosmopolitan outlook' (Morris, 2009: 218). While her research makes an important connection between the empirical applicability of the cosmopolitan framework, empirical accounts that describe a more 'ordinary' cosmopolitan outlook – where acceptance of asylum seekers is articulated within everyday talk – are rare.

In this paper, we apply the cosmopolitan framework to describe the narratives used by young Australians who argue for the acceptance of asylum seekers. We believe it important to study the views of this population for two reasons. First, there is room to expand upon theorisation

of the mechanisms that promote accepting rhetoric. Second, while a considerable body of literature exists on the attitudes of adult Australians towards asylum seekers, the views of younger Australians are less well understood (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014). As has been argued elsewhere, by investigating the views of young people we are able to measure the potential for social change (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014; Mokwena, 2001). Given Australia's current cohort of young people have been raised in a socio-political atmosphere saturated by debate on this issue, it is important to understand their views. This research may then provide insight into the attitudes of Australians on this matter in the future. We therefore use the concept of cosmopolitanism to demonstrate how some young Australians employ a narrative of acceptance to challenge current symbolic boundaries to the acceptance of asylum seekers in Australia.

### **Methods**

This study uses qualitative data from participants involved in the ongoing 'Social Futures and Life Pathways of Young People in Queensland' study – also known as the 'Our Lives' project. This study follows the social orientations of a single age cohort of young people in Queensland, Australia, as they move from adolescence into adulthood.<sup>3</sup> The collection of the first wave of survey data was undertaken in 2006 and involved 7031 young people aged 12/13 years old. Three additional waves have since been undertaken, with Wave 4 completed in late 2013 as cohort members approached the age of 21.

Given the saliency of the asylum seeker issue within the Australian socio-political environment, an item in the 2010 Wave 3 Our Lives survey asked respondents to consider their opinion on the asylum seeker issue. In 2010, the participants were 17/18 years old, either approaching, or having reached, voting age (N=2413). The survey data provided a baseline measurement of the position of the cohort on this topical issue. This was achieved by measuring their responses to the item: 'All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back'.<sup>4</sup> Preliminary analyses showed that approximately 15% of the surveyed cohort 'strongly agreed' that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned away, and 17% 'agreed' with the statement. On the other hand, 13% indicated that they 'strongly disagreed' with the suggestion and a further 20% 'disagreed'. A further 30% were ambivalent on the issue (Figure 1).

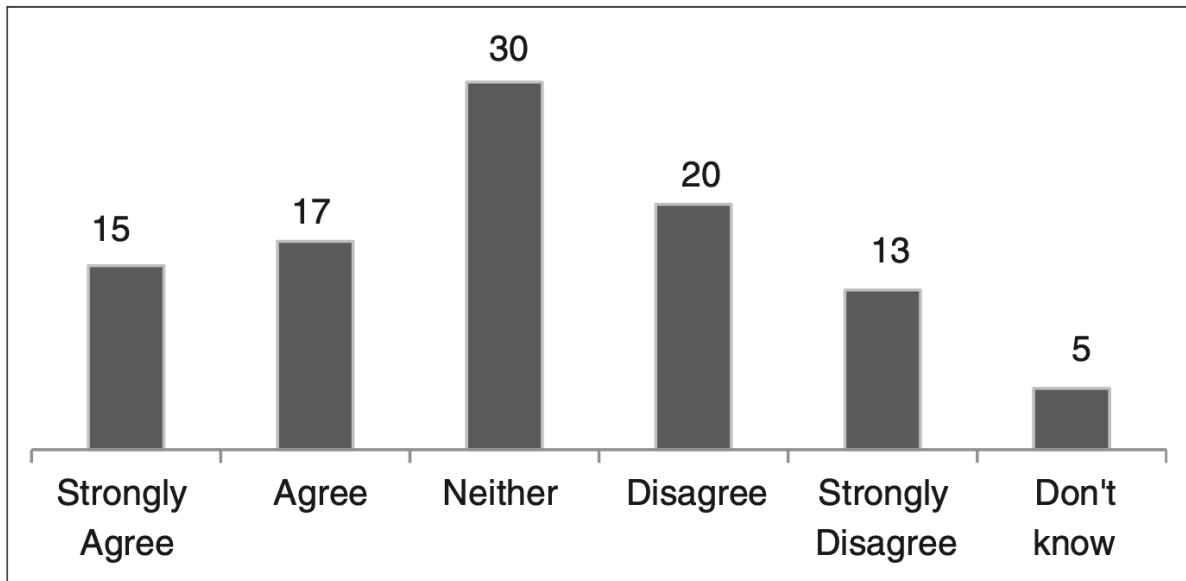


Figure 1: Percentage of responses to the statement 'All boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back' (N = 2413). Source: *Our Lives* (2010).

Further interrogation of these data suggested several factors predict a tendency towards disagreement with this statement. Those found to be more likely to express an acceptance of 'boat people' were women, those whose parents have higher levels of education, students from Independent and Catholic schools, young people who aspired to attend university, supporters of The Australian Greens political party and those who identified strongly as being a member of the 'global community'. The findings also suggested that the views of this group were, in the main, more accepting of asylum seekers than the broader population of Australian adults (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014).

The quantitative data mentioned earlier offer a descriptive account of the broader orientations of young people in Queensland towards boat people. We also used these data as a framing strategy for conducting interviews on this issue. These interviews were carried out between April and July 2012 with 20 study participants who, at the time, were aged 19/20 years old. Our qualitative sample was not intended to be representative of this larger study. Instead, we endeavoured to capture the narratives of individuals who had strong views on the topic.

To allow for greater comparison and contrast of expressed attitudes, Wave 3 respondents who had firm views regarding asylum seekers (positive or negative) were sampled for interview. To this end, a purposive intensity sampling strategy was applied (Teddlie and Yu, 2007), whereby prospective interviewees were selected from members of the *Our Lives* cohort who had indicated they strongly disagreed with the statement ('pro-asylum', N=317) or strongly agreed with the statement ('anti-asylum', N=352). Twenty-five participants living in South East Queensland were asked if they would participate, with 20 agreeing to be interviewed. The final interview sample (11 female, nine male) comprised of 12 'pro-asylum' and eight 'anti-asylum' participants and was diverse in terms of socio-economic status. All participants were born in Australia and said that English was their main language spoken at home.

Fourteen reported that both parents had been born in Australia. The remainder had at least one parent who was born overseas.

One interviewer was involved in the data collection. Interviews were undertaken in a location of the participants' choice (usually in their home, at a café or on a university campus) and were approximately 1 h in duration. The primary focus of the interviews was to expand upon participant's survey responses to the suggestion that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned away from Australia. The interviews were recorded and later fully transcribed. The transcripts were initially categorised as being either 'anti-asylum' or 'pro-asylum', and the data then open coded. During this process, data from two interviews were rejected, as the participants' opinion on this issue had become more moderate since they had completed the survey. Links with theoretical concepts were then made via the process of axial coding which is consistent with the analysis paradigm proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

The pro-asylum participants (eight female, three male) were all undertaking tertiary education. All except one had achieved an Overall Position (OP) score<sup>5</sup> in the range of 1–5, which academically placed them in the top 20% of Queensland OP eligible students in 2010 (Queensland Studies Authority, 2011). Ten had previously attended a private school (nine Independent, one Catholic). One pro-asylum interviewee had attended a state-funded school in a more affluent area of Brisbane.

Among the anti-asylum participants (four male, three female) there was greater diversity in terms of socio-economic status, school type and OP than the pro-asylum group. Some spoke of being financially comfortable and highly conservative in outlook. Others were of working-class origins and described how life had presented considerable challenge and adversity. While most in this group were attending some kind of tertiary institution, among this group there was also one sickness beneficiary and a young person who worked full-time at a fast food outlet.

The data are presented in the following two sections. In the first section, we demonstrate the narratives of the anti-asylum participants – young people who believe asylum seekers should be turned away from Australia. We then present the arguments offered by the pro-asylum group – those who argue that Australia should be more accepting.

### **Building boundaries**

'It's not our problem' was the argument made by the anti-asylum participants who were of the opinion that Australia had no obligation to accept boat people, and that these asylum seekers were bringing cultural practices to Australia incompatible with the Australian way of life. Furthermore, this group contended that the characteristics and behaviours of boat people made them undeserving of compassion. These descriptions of difference were then used as justification for why those requesting asylum should be excluded. Although some anti-asylum participants acknowledged the condition of asylum seekers was unfortunate, they did not believe it was the responsibility of Australia to take action to address the problem. From their perspective, since the cause of the problem did not derive from Australia, neither should



the solution. Taylor,<sup>6</sup> for example, felt asylum seekers were not an issue Australia should 'take on board'; instead, believing the Australian government should focus on looking after its own citizens. Other anti-asylum participants such as Jemma thought that if Australia accepted asylum seekers, this would create added problems for the country: 'I don't think it should be our responsibility. We should be sending them back and telling their country to kind of, I don't know, deal with it'.

The anti-asylum participants also expressed a belief that asylum seekers were merely exploiting this country's generosity and the hard work of its people. According to Archer (2009: 178), the 'bludger' is 'the antithesis and the enemy of the worker' who has traditionally received the scorn of those resentful of their taxes being used to provide means to those considered lazy and undeserving. Such views have existed within the Australian discourse since the 1970s. As a consequence of efforts to instil more conservative welfare frames into the Australian psyche, a new discourse surrounding entitlement to government support was developed. During this time, the rights of the taxpayer were brought to the forefront and a dependence on government welfare support was considered tantamount to thievery (Archer, 2009). Similar sentiments have resonated in the rhetoric of the young people who took an anti-asylum stance. Here, the asylum seeker was framed as a type of person who would take what they did not deserve and was unwilling to work for their own keep. James, a student with a very conservative outlook, argued asylum seekers do not wish to act for the good of Australia but merely intend to be exploitative. He invoked the term 'bludging', describing asylum seekers as people who wanted to 'sit around and do nothing'. The contempt he felt towards those he saw as lazy and wanting to take advantage of Australia was strongly evident:

It's just somewhere where they can come and bludge for the rest of their lives. They're on Centrelink [welfare support] straight away. . . They get looked after – nothing like that in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq or where ever they come from. They come here, they sit around and do nothing, get everything they want and then get paid for it.

Rory also spoke of how asylum seekers were travelling to Australia with an intention to exploit the country. He used the term 'freeloader' to reinforce a belief that asylum seekers come to Australia to enjoy the benefits provided by the Australian taxpayer and do nothing in return. As a future taxpayer, he thought he should not have to contribute to their support.

Like the findings of other studies (e.g. Haslam and Holland, 2012; Louis et al., 2007), the rejecting group also took exception to the amount asylum seekers were receiving in welfare payments. Taylor, for example, said that he had heard asylum seekers were being given substantially more in welfare payments than aged Australians and believed this to be unfair. His thoughts were that Australia needed to 'set its priorities straight' and look after Australians instead of 'trying to keep asylum seekers happy'. Likewise, Jemma complained that the current policy of supporting humanitarian entrants in Australia was unjust. As she explained: 'I think it's a bit unfair on like the pensioners and stuff. They're not getting looked after. The asylum seekers come here and they get it all for free'.

The statistical analysis of the attitudes of the entire Our Lives cohort towards asylum seekers undertaken previously suggested those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may experience a sense of vulnerability, believing they will have to compete with asylum seekers for scarce resources such as employment and housing (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014). In this study, the accounts of the rejecting respondents offer further support for such an explanation. Here, we heard those from underprivileged backgrounds voice concerns about funding being directed away from Australians in need. Jemma, a young woman who had experienced considerable hardship throughout her life, was worried about the welfare of her grandparents and did not think it was right that asylum seekers be supported while her own family members struggled financially. She spoke of her grandfather's failing health, and her concerns about how his care would be paid for. Callum, who lived in subsidised housing within a low socio-economic area, was angry about the possibility of humanitarian entrants taking affordable housing from low-income Australians. His parents had recently received a letter from the local state Member of Parliament outlining a proposal that families move to smaller accommodation or share with another family to reduce costs and help address the shortage of state-provided houses. Callum was anxious that housing shortages would be exacerbated by increased numbers of refugees and asylum seekers being accepted into Australia, and that his own family would be made to move to a smaller house or share with strangers because of an increased demand for low-cost housing.

Another concern related to dissimilarities in cultural practices and an apprehension that the presence of boat people would 'change' Australia. Perceptions of how differences in the culture and religion of asylum seekers might jeopardise the makeup of Australian society have been noted in a number of studies (e.g. Louis et al., 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2005). Similar fears were articulated here. There was a conviction that some immigrants, including humanitarian entrants, were coming to 'change our country' with their own cultural practice. The consensus among this group was that migrants should instead 'follow our rules'. James spoke of how Australian culture would be altered should asylum seekers be accepted. He argued that anyone who came to this country should act in accordance with 'the Australian way':

They're just going to start to change our values and our culture. Our culture will start to change. There's nothing wrong with having Chinese take away and eating Indian food – all that sort of stuff . . . Bring your food, we all love your food, but don't bring your governments and your morals to this country!

In Australia boat people are frequently portrayed by politicians and the media as being 'illegal immigrants' – people who have attempted to enter the country without authorisation (Pedersen et al., 2012; Rowe and O'Brien, 2014). The subsequent public resentment towards asylum seekers has been well documented. Despite the fact that coming to Australia to request asylum is not illegal under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2010), the construction of asylum seekers as 'illegals' has led to many within Australia supporting their forced removal (Haslam and Holland, 2012). Many of the anti-asylum participants expressed a belief that, by coming to Australia by boat, asylum seekers were

breaking the rules pertaining to legal entry into the country. By not 'doing the right thing', boat people were showing little regard for Australia and its laws. For instance, although Mandy acknowledged there might be a legitimate reason for why boat people would want to come to Australia, she also felt 'they just have to go by our way of doing it', and should adhere to the rules prescribed by the Australian government, rather than circumventing official processes. Furthermore, Kimberly was suspicious of the character of these individuals describing how 'they've got that kind of vicious streak in them' and were prepared to go to any lengths to reach Australia. If asylum seekers were not prepared to play by the rules, sympathy was simply not deserved. When asked if they were concerned about what might happen to these individuals should they be turned away, the position of the anti-asylum interviewees was that forcible exclusion was warranted because boat people had come through the 'wrong way'. As Jemma acknowledged, although this position seemed harsh and 'probably sounds wrong', it did not negate her belief that strict measures were appropriate and that Australia was under no obligation to demonstrate compassion.

It has been suggested in previous research that another motivation for such discourse is prejudice (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007; Pedersen et al., 2005). Every and Augoustinos (2007: 411) believe that in Australia a 'categorical denial of racism and the simultaneous exclusion, oppression, and demonisation of minorities is a defining feature of contemporary responses to out-groups such as asylum seekers'. These authors suggest that some people are aware that blatant discrimination is no longer condoned in Australia and will instead demonstrate a 'new racism' whereby prejudicial views are expressed in a manner less likely to be identified as possessing discriminatory undertones. This is achieved by focusing on differences in cultural practice and behaviours rather than differences in skin colour. Although most of the anti-asylum participants distanced themselves from the concept of racism, in their descriptions of boat people they did apply rhetoric similar to that described by Every and Augoustinos (2007). While we cannot identify with certainty what motivates the views of the anti-asylum participants in this study, and we by no means wish to characterise these young people as being 'ugly and bad' (Hage, 2000: 184), the implications of constructing symbolic boundaries through exclusionary language and its continued pervasiveness in current discussions on the asylum seeker issue are very apparent. As we show below, the respondents who were accepting of asylum seekers followed a radically different referential framework; one more commonly associated with a cosmopolitan outlook.

### **Challenging boundaries**

As we have outlined, cosmopolitanism presupposes a set of skills necessary for individuals to successfully cross boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This perspective can thus lend itself to an inclusive viewpoint. In this section, we focus upon the rhetoric of participants who argued that Australia should be accepting of asylum seekers. Specifically, the pro-asylum group described a belief that Australia has a responsibility to offer protection to asylum seekers; they showed openness towards asylum seekers and their ability to contribute to Australian society and expressed compassion for the plight of asylum seekers.

The recognition of responsibility towards all of humankind is an important element of cosmopolitan theory. There is, as Beck (2006: 73) explains, 'a growing awareness that we are living within a global network of responsibility from which none of us can escape'. From a cosmopolitan perspective, if one has the ability to do so, they should render assistance to others where there is need (Appiah, 2006; Beck, 2006; Parekh, 2003). Essentially, while we do not necessarily have to put our own vital well-being ahead of others, if there is no substantial cost to self, assistance should be offered (Parekh, 2003).

Whereas the position taken by the rejecting participants was that asylum seekers should be sent back, pro-asylum interviewees considered it unprincipled to be dismissive of the problems of others. They maintained it was Australia's responsibility to address this issue. Critical of any suggestion that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned away, Daniel described this act as 'a death sentence' for those on board these vessels. He found it difficult to understand how such an action could be justified. While the anti-asylum group argued that by allowing asylum seekers into Australia the cost to Australians would be too great, the accepting group believed this was merely an excuse to evade responsibility towards others in need. As with the anti-asylum participants, the pro-asylum group also invoked the concept of fairness, but this time it was asylum seekers not being treated fairly. For these 'accepting' interviewees, fairness was in recognising one's own privilege and taking the steps to share that good fortune. They also argued that, as part of the global community, Australia needed to accept a fair share of the world's displaced. As Ashleigh stated, given Australia's relative wealth, Australia was much better positioned than many other nations to absorb people who required asylum:

In my opinion they have it so much worse off than we do. Like, they're running away from their own country because they just can't live there. . . We obviously have a lot here – you know? We're living – doing whatever we want. So, kind of, why not help them out?

Many of the pro-asylum group pointed out that if Australians found themselves in the same situation, they would also ask for help. This was the view of Emma who was extremely passionate about the protection of those requesting asylum. She challenged those with anti-asylum sentiments to imagine themselves in the same situation before they abdicated their responsibility in finding a solution. If Australians were to put themselves in the position of those aboard the boats, she believed they might change their views:

I don't know what it feels like, but I think people have to try and imagine or think of themselves in that situation because I think if they did they – if people actually thought about, 'If I was in that situation, what would I want people to do?' They would want people to accept them. (Emma)

Cosmopolitans share a preparedness to encounter and positively interact with people, ideas and locations outside of their own national boundaries (Calhoun, 2008; Skrbiš and Woodward, 2011). This openness can manifest in various ways. For example, it may be an affinity towards consuming foreign commodities or experiencing foreign cultures (Skrbiš and

Woodward, 2007). It may also be a willingness to tolerate a multicultural presence within one's day-to-day environment or a demonstration of inclusiveness and acceptance (Lamont and Aksartova, 2002).

While the anti-asylum group made the argument that asylum seekers would change Australia, the 'accepting' participants were more open to cultural difference. Ashleigh, for instance, saw Australia's cultural diversity as being the 'soul' of the nation and spoke of how its multicultural makeup gave Australia its distinctive 'spirit'. The view was that asylum seekers would add to, rather than detract from, Australia's cultural identity. Advocating for the pro-asylum stance, the accepting participants also emphasised the similarities between Australians and asylum seekers. The focus on commonality between different groups is a strategy identified by Pedersen et al. (2011) as a mechanism by which discrimination towards marginalised groups can be reduced. Since the majority of Australians originated from elsewhere, the accepting group suggested people should reflect on whether they had the right to decide who should come here and who should not. As Caitie claimed, it was unreasonable for those living in Australia to say asylum seekers do not belong, particularly when it was likely that, in the past, their own families would have taken advantage of the hospitality extended to immigrants by the Australian government.

In addition, it was argued that asylum seekers would make a material contribution to Australian society. As Daniel said, there was no reason why asylum seekers should not demonstrate the same level of initiative and commitment as past migrants. Moreover, Katrina pointed out that asylum seekers were likely to do the type of jobs some Australians did not want: 'Most of them are doing the jobs that we don't want to do anyway, like working 'til 5am at the 7-Eleven or, like driving our taxis. Not many Caucasian Australians want to do those jobs' (Katrina).

In showing openness towards asylum seekers, the pro-asylum participants suggested the motive behind much anti-asylum sentiment in Australia was racism and prejudice. Lily described the laws designed to keep asylum seekers out of Australia as being parochial. Referring to Australia's past discriminatory immigration policies, she said the current situation was 'like going back to the White Australia policy'. Caitie believed politicians and the media were deliberately exaggerating the numbers of people from the Middle East aboard the boats in order to arouse prejudice and fear. Although noticeably uncomfortable with making such an accusation, Emma thought prejudicial sentiments were the source of much animosity by Australians towards asylum seekers. She felt the scenario might be different if asylum seekers were white.

Compassion is a response to the distress of others (Fine, 2012; Sznajder, 1998; van Hooft, 2009). This emotion involves the belief that suffering is bad and that concern is warranted (Nussbaum, 2001). Furthermore, compassion can be extended beyond close ties and can motivate us to 'act well' towards strangers (van Hooft, 2009: 2). As the pro-asylum participants argued for the protection of asylum seekers, they demonstrated a high degree of compassion towards them. Given the circumstances, Thomas believed the displaced had little

choice but to transgress when survival is at stake. It was in his words ‘a bit of a case of a beggar stealing a loaf of bread because he can’t buy it’. Emma also spoke of there being no ‘right way’ to be a refugee, pointing out those who boarded the boats were desperately looking for a better life:

I think if you’re a refugee, you’re a refugee and you’re obviously fleeing from something horrific otherwise you wouldn’t put yourself on a boat. You wouldn’t – and people say, ‘Oh, like how could they do that? How could they risk their lives like that?’ That’s how desperate they are. They’re risking their lives because they think they’re going to die if they stay where they are.

Where the rejecting participants advocated the building of boundaries to keep boat people out of Australia, the accepting group suggested strategies as to how Australians might view asylum seekers in a different light. When asked what they thought needed to be done to resolve tensions in Australia surrounding asylum seekers, they argued that this could be achieved only if the current discursive constructions used to describe asylum seekers were changed, and if public perceptions were challenged. Maddie, for instance, felt that one way to change public views was to address the way asylum seekers were being represented and ‘change the language’ surrounding asylum seekers. The pro-asylum interviewees highlighted education as being a possible tool for promoting and fostering the development of accepting views towards asylum seekers by the Australian public. For instance, in recognising that the media play an important role in shaping public opinion, some pro-asylum participants suggested it could also be used to promote accepting views towards asylum seekers and not just antagonism. Others believed schools could teach acceptance. As Caitie pointed out, a school and its ‘whole philosophy’ helps young people form their opinions and was an environment where attitudes of acceptance towards the displaced could be taught and reinforced. In the main, there was optimism amongst the pro-asylum people that Australians could eventually learn to look past their concerns and ‘just see a person’ who needed support and assistance. After all, as Ashleigh poignantly commented: ‘We’re all here; we may as well help each other out. We all just die in the end’.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Symbolic boundaries are built and maintained by those who seek to contain and protect ‘their’ space from outsiders (Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002). This boundary building can be achieved through the use of language intended to highlight the undesirable qualities of those outside the group or to provide justification for exclusionary practices. In Australia, the power of language in representing asylum seekers as objectionable is well documented (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007; O’Doherty and Augoustinos, 2008). Similarly in the discourses of our participants who hold firm convictions that boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned away from Australian shores, we found evidence of symbolic boundary construction through language designed to obstruct the acceptance of asylum seekers. Whether they accused asylum seekers of acting illegally, argued their values would change Australian society, or described them as having a ‘vicious streak’, the underlying premise

was that Australia had no responsibility towards these individuals and that compassion was not warranted.

We argue that the concept of cosmopolitanism delivers a framework for understanding how the boundaries to acceptance are being challenged. Individuals with a cosmopolitan outlook are described as seeing themselves and their country as having an obligation towards the global community. They also display openness towards cultural diversity and express compassion towards members of the global community who are in need of protection (Appiah, 2006; Morris, 2009; Nussbaum, 1996). What we have found in this research are everyday young people demonstrating a willingness to think beyond the boundaries set by their own nation and who engage in an open and reflexive manner with the global community.

We believe a cosmopolitan perspective can inform inclusive attitudes towards foreign others who are seeking refuge. Those young people who are supportive of Australia taking a more accepting stance towards asylum seekers clearly demonstrated such an outlook. In explaining why they opposed turning away asylum seeker boats, the pro-asylum individuals applied reasoning consistent with cosmopolitan principles. They argued that Australia had a global responsibility to be accepting and saw asylum seekers as being not only individuals in need of compassion and protection but also as people who could contribute to Australia. These findings, therefore, provide an example of inclusive reasoning among young Australians, which is, as Lamont and Aksartova (2002: 18) argue, 'essential for understanding the process of bridging boundaries and for fighting more effectively against exclusion'.

If a 'cosmopolitan' acceptance of asylum seekers is to be reinforced in Australia, how might this be achieved? While acknowledging that we are walking what Roudometof (2012: 116) describes as the 'fine line between describing social life in the twenty-first century and simultaneously proposing new forms of thinking', we wish to make comment on this matter. Some of our pro-asylum participants spoke of how education might not only increase knowledge of other peoples' lived realities but also build concern for the circumstances asylum seekers are experiencing. The importance of educating Australians about asylum seekers has also been highlighted in the literature (e.g. Pedersen et al., 2005, 2012). In socio-political environments where hostility towards asylum seekers is palpable, perhaps exposure to cosmopolitan principles via the media or through formal education would facilitate a more compassionate understanding of asylum seeker issues. Maybe then, like the 'accepting' participants we identified in our study, more Australians would adopt a stance that is informed by the cosmopolitan principles of responsibility, openness and compassion.

In summary, the purpose of this paper was to isolate and explore the language of young people who have strong views on the issue of asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat. First, we showed how symbolic boundaries against the acceptance of asylum seekers by Australia are maintained in the language of young people who believe boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned away from Australia. We then demonstrated how the narratives of some young Australians challenge these boundaries. Furthermore, by arguing that Australia

should not turn away boats carrying asylum seekers, the pro-asylum group articulated a viewpoint consistent with a cosmopolitan perspective. All too often boat people are constructed in such a manner as to justify strict exclusionary measures being imposed against them. Here, we have identified a narrative among young Australians that promotes a more accepting view and embraces the principles of cosmopolitanism. Such a perspective, we believe, has the potential to challenge the construction and maintenance of exclusionary symbolic boundaries against asylum seekers in Australia.

### Notes

1. The terms 'boat people' and 'unexpected arrivals' are used when specifically referring to asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia by boat. When we refer more broadly to people seeking humanitarian refuge we use the term 'asylum seeker'.
2. In August 2001 the Liberal–National coalition government refused to allow a Norwegian vessel, the *MV Tampa*, which was carrying asylum seekers rescued from a fishing boat, entry to Australian waters. In October 2001 the Australian government also made allegations that asylum seekers had deliberately thrown their children into the ocean to avoid being turned away from Australian shores. Despite a Senate inquiry concluding the accusations were unfounded, this allegation is still used in anti-asylum rhetoric to support the belief that asylum seekers do not share the same moral standards as Australians.
3. For more information go to: <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/ourlives/>
4. This item is also used in the Australian Election Study. Website: <http://aes.anu.edu.au/>
5. Equivalent to A-Levels in the United Kingdom. For further information go to: <http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/>
6. All names are pseudonyms.

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